

Contributions

BACCALAUREATE SERMON

By J. W. Cummings at the baccalaureate exercises in Ashland College Chapel, June 1, 1902.

By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. * * * For he endured as seeing him who is invisible. Heb. 11:24-27.

The muster roll of history furnishes no grander names than those found in that list of Hebrew worthies in the chapter from which the text is taken. Of this catalogue there is no name that will more surely arrest attention, as there is no story of a merely human life more worthy of study, than that of Moses "the man of God," whose faith receives the emphasis of twice mention in a brief paragraph.

The romance of his life appeals to old and young alike. The child of slaves, foredoomed to death, the adopted son of a princess, the heir of kings; the hunted fugitive from justice, the exiled shepherd, the scholar, skilled in the highest learning of his age; the hero, the poet, the statesman; the emancipator of a race, the lawgiver of the world; the wandering pilgrim who must lie down and die with the goal of all his journeyings just before him, denied his last request, yet kissed to sleep by the Almighty:

"With God's own hand in that lonely land
To lay him in his grave,"—

surely from the brain of the wildest dreamer never was such a story coined.

There is much of course in the life of this one, chosen to stand mediator between God and great people, which cannot be shared by ordinary men. He was ordained for a mighty work; happy in the circumstances of his birth and life and death as no other mortal dares to hope. Yet, notwithstanding this, his opportunity was in his own keeping. The secret of Moses' life, as the secret of every life worth living, is found in certain key words of the text: "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. * * * For he endured as seeing Him who is invisible." "Refusing," "choosing," "enduring," made possible by the vision of the Invisible thru faith,—these epitomize his career, explain his successes, and are the steps to be taken by every one whose life would fill the measure of God's ordainment.

These words of the text are easily read, yet it requires a vivid imagination to grasp all they imply, for they describe to us one of the most extraordinary acts of a deliberate renunciation of the worldly, of a deliberate choice of the spiritual, of patient endurance under circumstances which might well make the strongest human will stagger as of drunkenness, the world has ever seen. From whatever standpoint we view the story, wheth-

er of choice or sacrifice or endurance, it is equally marvelous.

To ordinary ambition the son of Pharaoh's daughter occupied one of the most enviable positions which fortune had to bestow. The Egyptian monarchy then stood in the front rank of kingdoms, and the sceptre itself may have seemed to be within the grasp of the adopted son of royalty,—a man "mighty in words and in deeds." Before him was every temptation which the world and the flesh could offer. The treasures of Egypt, gold and silver, luxury and culture, a life of ease and of selfish enjoyment; dainty fare, grand banquets, the charms of a court not over strict in its morals,—"the pleasures of sin for a season,"—all these spread their tempting array before this "son of the bond woman," drawing him to a life of softness and self-gratification. Surely it was no light thing to renounce a heritage like this. There must have been motives of irresistible power to constrain to such a decision; to cause him to cast his lot with slaves, to suffer affliction with the people of God, to make the sacrifice and undergo the labor which such a choice involved.

Wonderful as were his renunciation and choice, these were eclipsed by his marvelous endurance. The real trial did not come for Moses when he first turned his back upon court and palace and heard men sneer at him as a madman and fool. That test never comes at the moment of our first decision for right. Then the glow of excitement from the consciousness of duty done sustains us. The trial waits the reaction which follows. For Moses it came when rejected by his countrymen for whom he had sacrificed so much; when no one of that whole generation, groaning under the lash of taskmasters, dared to follow when he would lead; it came when the long years in the land of Midian began to multiply in number. There he worshiped the Almighty; there he fed his soul on the promises made to the fathers; there he dreamed of the day of deliverance for his people. But the days and years roll on, and God does not speak. Where is the sign of His coming? Surely tomorrow. But "tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps on at this petty pace," as if yesterday would "light the way to dusty death." "You are forgotten," whispers the tempter. But Moses endures. He triumphs over sickening doubt. At the burning bush he receives a new revelation of the purposes of God,—a new, personal commission,—and goes back to Egypt to take up the work for which all the past has been a preparation.

Then came these forty more years of wilderness experience; of marching and countermarching, suffering such contradictions at the hands of the stiff-necked people; years of complaints and murmurings, of plagues and rebellions, until a whole generation was consumed in God's wrath. But Moses fails not.

Even yet the grace of endurance has not had its perfect work. The forty years

have passed. The dreary wilderness journeyings over broken rocks as thru waterless deserts are at an end. The thrice disciplined armies of Israel stand with their great leader "on this side Jordan's wave." On the other side is the reward of all their evil. Then will they sit down under their own vine and fig tree and "drink of the wells which they digged not," in the land hallowed by the altars of their fore-fathers, to stand on that sacred soil, to rebuild these altars,—that for four score years had been the leader's dream, the reward of his toil, the goal of his wanderings. It may not be, "Get thee up on this Mount Abarim and see the land I have given thee; and when thou hast seen it thou shalt be gathered unto thy people." Moses was sore disappointed and entreates the Lord, but the answer is almost stern: "Speak to me no more of this matter. Thou shalt not pass over this Jordan. Only afar shall thine eyes see the goodly land and Lebanon."

And Moses endures, without a murmur, with no tone of sadness in his parting words, he bids his people farewell, climbs the mountain top, feasts his eyes upon the beauties of all earthly Canaan, then lies down in the silence of solitude on the bed angels had prepared, "and was not, for God took him."

You will pardon me, my young friends, for having dwelt so long on this more than twice told tale which has come down to us thru the ages from the land of blazing suns and blistering sands, "shadows of the crumbling gods of night." But this old tale bears witness to all centuries. Outward circumstances have changed, nothing around reminds us of Egypt with its idolatries and seductions; nothing recalls the debasing servitude of that people with whom Moses cast his lot. To be identified with the people of God is to be numbered with the wisest and best of earth's children, and yet if we but penetrate beneath the surface we will find nothing changed. There is the same choice between God and the world, between the visible and the invisible,—the same election between what men most covet and what some one has termed, "the sublime folly of the kingdom of God." On the other hand there is the temptation to a life of sentimental trifling,—"touching troubadours' guitars to the course of the sun," on the other the stern voice of duty. Good and evil ever range themselves in opposing ranks. In the one we have the gilded pleasures to which men lose their hearts, dreams of ambition and wealth and gratified sense,—the higher life, greater good and unknown future in the other. To us is given to choose. We are "captains of our own souls"—"We are our own fate," as Lucile tells us. Choose we must, and our choice goes on forever.

The desire of every one is a satisfied life. But I am sure that it is needless for me to warn you against seeking that satisfaction in the easy indulgence in the meaner animal pleasures of unruly appetite. It is not hard to refuse to make our members instruments of unrighteousness. We all "ought to think